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SIPDIS
FOR UNDER SECRETARY BURNS AND DELEGATION

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TAGS: PREL, PGOV, UZ
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE VISIT OF UNDER SECRETARY BURNS TO
UZBEKISTAN

CLASSIFIED BY: Nicholas Berliner, Pol-Econ Chief; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

1. (C) Embassy Tashkent warmly welcomes the visit of Under Secretary Burns and delegation. This visit comes at a pivotal moment as we seek to rebuild a relationship with the Government of Uzbekistan (GOU) that has been foundering on the shoals of mutual mistrust for the past four years. Despite this history, we have seen fitful progress in our ability to engage the GOU on a number of key issues including, most importantly, the establishment of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) through Uzbekistan. With the GOU also seeking to recalibrate its relationship with Washington,

your visit comes at an ideal time to drive home the message that we are ready to put the past behind us and move forward in a way that allows us to manage sensitive issues like human rights in a constructive way. At the same time, it is essential to impress upon the Uzbeks that they too must do their part in this process of rapprochement.

2. (C) Post, together with the Department, has prepared briefing papers that lay out the major issues and points to raise with the GOU. Rather than repeat those points, this scene setter seeks to contextualize Uzbekistan and answer the question of where we see this country going and why we believe the U.S. must be present in that process.

The Political Climate: The Times They Will Change

3. (C) This year marked the twentieth anniversary of President Karimov's rise to power in Uzbekistan. Karimov remains the ultimate arbiter in Uzbek political life, yet in many ways the post-Karimov period is already beginning. Increasingly, we have witnessed signs that the GOU bureaucracy is atrophying, unable to make or implement basic decisions and policies. This seems to reflect the slow disengagement of the seventy-one-year-old Karimov from the day-to-day management of the government, which has left the lower levels without the presidential guidance that has driven this government for the past two decades. Uncertain of the president's wishes and weaned in a climate of near absolutism, Karimov's minions are left in the unfamiliar position of having to manage issues without the security of presidential approval. The result is bureaucratic sclerosis.

4. (C) In this context, although it is still important to interact with Karimov, we believe it is also important to take the long view about Uzbekistan. Although we do not know the timing, Karimov will not be in power forever. We need to look beyond Karimov and his known shortcomings to how we build a relationship with Uzbekistan that is more institutionalized and less dependent on one man. It is improbable that a presidential succession in Tashkent will result in a dramatic change in the character of Uzbek political life in the short term, but we could nonetheless see significant changes around the margins that would take this society in a more positive direction over the long term. In building this relationship now,

despite the obvious shortcomings in human rights and freedom, we are making an investment in the future that will leave us better situated with whoever and whatever comes next.

The Future of Uzbekistan

5. (C) Apart from Uzbekistan's strategic location in the context of Afghanistan, it is important to look at the nature of this society. First of all, Uzbekistan is overwhelmingly young, with more than half the population under the age of twenty-five. At twenty-eight million, Uzbekistan has nearly as many people as the rest of Central Asia together. Second, Uzbekistan has one of the strongest Islamic identities in Central Asia and rightly identifies itself as one of the cradles of Islamic learning and civilization. Finally, despite this Islamic identity, the country remains overwhelmingly secular in its outlook.

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6. (C) The tensions between the secular and the Islamic identities are topical here and in no way decided, despite the efforts of the government to emphasize the cultural aspects of Islam at the expense of the more openly spiritual ones. At the same time, the outlook of Uzbekistan's youth is far from clear, as the first truly post-Soviet generation comes of age and begins to seek its place in the economic, political and social realms of society. The managed economic transition in Uzbekistan may have brought relative stability and shelter from the storm of the global economic crisis, but it has not created nearly the number of jobs that this next generation will seek. Looking out several years, Uzbekistan could continue to evolve along a more secular path, or the Islamic identity could strengthen, particularly if fed the toxic mix of a lack of economic opportunity that has done so much to sweeten radicalism's call elsewhere in the Islamic world.

7. (C) It is in the interest of the United States and the Central Asian region that Uzbekistan's secular identity prospers over the long term. However, to support this, we need to be engaged here, including through our assistance programs, all of which have shrunk dramatically with the souring of the political relationship. Rebuilding a working relationship with the GOU, even with Karimov, is the only way start influencing this society in a positive way.

Russia: Gone, but Not Forgotten

8. (C) Although eighteen years have passed since Uzbekistan was last ruled from Moscow and younger generations of Uzbeks no longer speak Russian, the Uzbeks have a relationship with Russia that is at once close, but fraught. There has been no Russian Ambassador in Tashkent for eight months. Russia remains Uzbekistan's largest investor and trading partner and, despite the waning of the Russian language among the young, retains a strong cultural and media influence that is amplified by omnipresent Russian language television. At the same time, however, the GOU and Karimov in particular, have become increasingly mistrustful of Russia's political aims in the region. Events in Georgia last August stoked suspicions in many minds here that Russia seeks to reassert its dominion over its former colonies by any means, including military force. In the time since then, the GOU has begun to back away from what it views as Russian-dominated institutions, including the CSTO and the SCO.

9. (C) Recent Russian behavior in the region has only exacerbated these suspicions. On the vital issue of water, for example, the Uzbeks believe that the Russians are playing a double game, seeking to sow discord among the Central Asian countries in an effort to "divide and conquer." Efforts on the part of Moscow to renegotiate gas contracts with Uzbekistan have further inflamed suspicions to the point that Karimov believes the Russians are actively fomenting extremist attacks as a means of creating a pretext for intervention. Uzbek gas, which heretofore has been marketed exclusively to Russia, is now likely to reach new export markets as a pipeline to China and the Nabucco project move forward.

10. (C) Whatever the basis of these fears, Russia's fall from favor in Tashkent is yet another opening that we can exploit to advance our objectives. Without lending support to "great game" theorists through our actions, we have a chance to build constructive relations by supporting the sovereignty of the Central Asian states. Our greatest challenge is to help them build that sovereignty in a way that is sustainable and that moves countries such as Uzbekistan closer to more progressive standards of governance.

Managing Uzbek Pride

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11. (C) Uzbek pride often gets the better of rationality and officials here will think nothing of cutting off their nose to spite their face. Karimov and every bureaucrat under him will go to any length not to be perceived as bending to outside pressure, even when doing so would advance the country's national interest. As such, a strategy of private, but frank diplomacy pays many more dividends here than our efforts to force the GOU's hand through more openly coercive measures. Your meetings will be an opportunity to reinforce President Obama's Cairo message of respecting other traditions, which was very well received here, but also to remind the GOU that its actions and the impressions they create matter greatly in shaping views of Uzbekistan in the United States. Our goal is not to change the regime in Uzbekistan, but rather to ameliorate its behavior in a way that addresses the issues that are important to our Congress and to our people.

12. (U) Thank you for deciding to come to Tashkent; we look forward to your visit.

NORLAND